

## Asian and European Roots of Bioethics: Fritz Jahr's 1927 Definition and Vision of Bioethics

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*In sum, the guidance for our moral actions has to be the **Bio-Ethical Imperative: Respect every living being, including animals, as an end in itself and treat it, if possible, as such!** And if someone does not want to accept the absolute validity of such a rule in as far as animals and plants are concerned, he should — repeating what was said before — in recognition of the moral obligation towards human society in general nevertheless follow it.*

*Fritz Jahr 'Tierschutz und Ethik (Animal Protection and Ethics)'  
Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik, 1928, 4(6/7): 102*

### The 1927 Definition and Concept of Bioethics

It is widely taught that the term “bioethics” was first used in the USA by Potter and Hellegers 1970 [4; 5; 13; 14]. Today the term is widely used as synonymous with medical ethics. But there is a difference between respect for humans and respect for the entire world of “bios”, i.e. respect for all forms of life. Taoist reverence for nature, Buddhist compassion with all forms of suffering life, Francesco Assisi's call for sisterhood and brotherhood with plants and animals, and Albert Schweitzer's philosophy of respect for all forms of life supporting his medical missions in Africa are prime examples of deep human compassion with non-human life as well as examples of a human commitment to respect other forms of life. Over the centuries, there had been various names, principles, and narratives to support and to request a human attitude and ethics towards all

living individuals and species and the interrelationship between plants, animals, humans, and environments. But the term and the definition of “bioethics” is new.

Bioethics as a term and a concept first was coined by Fritz Jahr, a Protestant pastor and ethicist in Halle an der Saale, in a 1927 editorial article in *Kosmos*, the leading German science journal, entitled, “Bio-Ethics: A Review of the Ethical Relationship of Humans to Animals and Plants”. Jahr discussed results of recent neurophysiology and psychological studies on plants and animals and drew these conclusions:

First of all, there is this basic similarity of humans and animals as probands in psychology. Psychology is not limited to humans any more today, it applies the same methods to animal life; and as there is a comparative anatomical-zoological research, there are highly educative comparisons between human and animal souls. Indeed, also the beginnings of plant psychology can be recognized. Even beginnings of plant psychology appear.... Under these circumstances it is only consequent when R. Eisler in summarizing uses the term Bio-Psychik (soul science of all life forms). It is only a small step from here to *Bio-Ethics* [Bio-Ethik, highlighted by Jahr], i.e. the assumption of moral duties not only towards humans but to all living beings as well. In fact, Bio-Ethics is definitely not only a discovery of the present. As a particularly impressive example from the past we may remember the figure of St. Franz of Assisi and his great love to animals, progressing in his warm sympathy for all living beings the Rousseauian enthusiasm for nature in its entirety by centuries [6:2].

Jahr hints at the influence of Buddhist thought on European thinkers during the time of early nineteenth century romanticism in mentioning Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, and Eduard von Hartmann. He concludes his article, “So that the rule for our actions may be the Bio-ethical Demand: *Respect every living being on principle as a goal in itself and treat it, if possible, as such!*” [6:4, highlighted by Jahr].

Thus, the origin of the term and concept of bioethics is closely related to nineteenth century progress in the life sciences, in particular in experimental physiology and psychology. In 1878 Wilhelm Wundt founded the first research institute for experimental psychology in Leipzig; his three-volume book *Grundzuege of Physiological Psychology*, documenting similar neural and physiological reactions and goal- and survival-oriented activities in humans, animals and plants had its sixth edition in 1908–1911. Wundt’s *Lectures on the Soul of Humans and Animals*, 1863 [6th ed. 1919], Fechner’s *Nana or the Soul Life of Plants* (1848), and his two-volume *Elements of Psychophysics* (1860) were widely read bestsellers. Methods and arguments were sharpened to overcome the Cartesian mechanical body-soul dualism, and to research goal-, life- and survival-oriented wills and

interactions between living and sensing environments and living and sensing beings. In the interest of methodological clarity, Rudolf Eisler in *Workings of the Soul: Ideas towards an Organic Psychology* (1909), suggested a new term employing new research methods for “psychological facts as biological factors”. He says,

If we want to hold on to the unity of natural causality also in the realm of organic matter, we have to add (not replace) *Biopsychics* to Biophysics and Biochemistry and to recognize that psychic movements of lower or higher form, simple and complicated wills, tendencies to *protect organic unity* and drives and *willings* [Wollungen] ... are means to the highest goal — ruling or modifying directly or indirectly actions of life ... Far away from describing the will as a product of mechanical reflexes, reflexes are better understood as *residuals of original will processes*. [17:2f; 18].

Modern neuroscience is still pondering the same questions.

But Jahr also takes issue with — what he calls — Buddhist fanatics, who do not kill even deadly snakes, because they “also are our brothers and sisters”.

Our preconceptions are different to those of these Indian fanatics. We cannot agree with such sentiment; we consider it our duty to kill dangerous animals, if we can .... Our farm animals are killed by the butcher and harmless wildlife by the hunter, because we want to eat meat, some of us do not want to miss, while in tropical countries there is an abundance of vegetarian food. Our animal protection, however, is limited by utility aspects, bravely disregarded by the Indians, and we are satisfied to eliminate at least unnecessary torture to animals. [6:3f]

But he strongly holds that “no decent person will accept without opposition when a rascal without afterthought cuts off with his stick the tops of flowers on the road or when children pick flowers only to throw them away after a few steps” [6:3f].

It is Jahr’s argument that new scientific knowledge always is a quest for ethical reflection and resolve to find appropriate guide, and stewarding cultures and ethics. Warren Reich’s research on the 1970 definitions and visions of bioethics in the United States [15; 16] demonstrates that Potter and Hellegers, similar to Jahr, have argued that new scientific evidence requires new priorities in ethics research, and modifications and improvements in professional and personal attitudes. Thus, Jahr, Potter and Hellegers share one important point of view: the urgent need of special attention towards teaching ethics in the professional and personal settings at a time of eroding values and traditions globally, in part related to progress in science and technology, in part as an independent evolutionary development in cultural history. However, Jahr’s concept of bioethics is wider than the focus of Potter and the more specific focus of Hellegers; it includes

essentially all forms of life. While Reich defines bioethics as “the systematic study of human conduct in the area of the life sciences and health care, in as far as this conduct is examined in the light of moral values and principles”[16:29], Jahr would define it as the systematic study of human conduct in the area of the life sciences and the personal, professional and public moral commitment and conduct towards all forms of life, in as far as this conduct is examined in the light of moral values and principles.

In a number of articles between 1927 and 1934, Jahr develops three lines of argument in supporting the professional identity of bioethics: bioethics is (1) a new academic discipline, (2) a necessary moral attitude, conviction and conduct in recognising and respecting all forms of life and all living interactions in nature and culture, (3) an obligation in professional settings, as well as in education, consultancy, public morality, and culture.

## The Bioethical Imperative

### *Conceptual*

Jahr develops his vision of bioethics as a discipline, a principle, and a virtue in close discussion with Kant, extending the formal Categorical Imperative towards a more encompassing content-based Bioethical Imperative. The Bioethical Imperative is a guide for ethical and cultural attitudes and responsibilities in the life sciences and towards all forms of life. The Bioethical Imperative is a necessary result of moral reasoning based on empirical physiology and psychology of humans, plants, and animals; as such it needs to educate and steward personal and collective cultural and moral attitudes, and calls for new respect and responsibilities towards all forms of life. The “sanctity of life” is the foundation of Jahr’s 1927 Bioethical Imperative, while 1788 Kant named the “sanctity of the moral law” as the foundation of the Categorical Imperative,

The moral law is sacred (inviolable). The person is not sacred, but humankind in his person must be recognized as sacred. Everything in the entire creation, if one wants and has power over it, can be used as a means only; only the human person and with it every intelligent being *is an end in himself*. He is the subject of the moral law, which is sacred, based on the autonomy of his will. [Kant: A156]

### *Empirical*

The Bioethical Imperative is based on historical and other evidence that “compassion is an empirical established phenomenon of the human soul” [7:100]. I have

not found a reference by Jahr to his contemporary Albert Schweitzer, nor vice versa. But Albert Schweitzer in a difficult to find 1926 article in “Mut und Kraft”, *Zeitschrift fuer Evangelische Kirchengemeinden* describes his early childhood compassionate intuition for animals: “In particular, I suffered that the poor animals had to suffer from so much pain and suffering. Looking at an old limping horse, pulled harshly by one man while being beaten by another — it was dragged to the slaughtering house in Kolmar — has haunted me for weeks.” Schweitzer reveals that from then on he added a sacred sentence to his evening prayer, “Dear God, protect and bless everything which breathes, prevent evil and let it sleep in rest.” [19:5].

Jahr points out that there is “wrong love” and “true love”, however. The old lady fattening her poodle while letting her servants suffer displays false love and compassion similar to those people who practice corruption, favouritism, and unfair dealings with fellow humans. There is no conflict between compassion to all forms of life and compassion towards fellow humans [7:100]. This is the way, it works:

When we have a feeling heart also for animals, we will not deprive suffering humans of our compassion and care as well. Whose love is large enough to transcend the limits of human-only and sees sanctity in the most miserable creature, will recognize and cherish sanctity also in the poorest and lowest of his human brothers, and he will not reduce it to a specific social class, an interest group, a party, or anything else. On the other hand, insensible cruelty to animals is evidence of a cruel character, which may, as such become dangerous towards his human environment. [7:100]

Jahr argues, that animal protection has a positive effect on ethical behaviour towards humans, popular education and public education, and that even those who do not accept bioethical reasoning should accept animal protection as part of a culture of civilised and moral behaviour among humans. “The close connection between animal protection and ethics in essence is based on the fact that we have not only moral obligations towards fellow-humans, but also towards animals — even towards plants — so that we therefore may expressively speak of a ‘Bio-Ethik’”. [7:101]

### *Rich in Content*

The Bioethical Imperative strengthens and complements moral recognition and duties towards fellow humans in the Kantian context and should be followed in respect of human culture and mutual moral obligations among humans.

In sum, the guidance for our moral actions has to be the *Bio-Ethical Imperative: Respect every living being, including animals, as an end in itself and treat it, if possible, as such!* And if someone does not want to accept the absolute validity of such a rule in as far as animals and plants are concerned, he should — repeating what was said before — in recognition of the moral obligation towards human society in general nevertheless follow it. [7:102].

Jahr's Imperative is content-rich; Kant's Imperative allows himself the luxury of formality only.

### *Living Institutions*

The Bioethical Imperative must recognise, steward, and cultivate the struggle for life among forms of life, and natural and cultural living environments.

Our entire life and activities in politics, business, in the office and in the laboratory, in the workshop, in the farm fields are ... not based on love in the first place, but many times on competition with other competitors. Quite often we are not cognizant of this fight as long as we proceed without hate and in a fair, legal and accepted manner. Similarly, as we cannot avoid the fight with our fellow humans, we cannot avoid the struggle for life with other living beings. Nevertheless, we will not want to loose the ideal of responsibility as a guiding point, neither for the first nor for the latter. [7:101].

To this we could add — and Jahr's bioethical model of interacting life most definitely would agree — that institutions of healthcare and care interact, serve, compete, and struggle with other forms of institutional life and with individuals, who in various capacities are a part of these institutions. For Jahr, bioethics and environmental ethics, corporate and institutional ethics, social and sexual ethics must follow the same principles and virtues of responsibility [7; 9; 10].

### *Care for Health*

The Bioethical Imperative implements compassion, love, and solidarity with all forms of life as a content-based principle and virtue into the "golden rule" and into Kant's Categorical Imperative, which are reciprocal and formal only. Jahr asks "how do we do good?" and responds:

The so-called Golden Rule answers this question: Everything that you want the people do to you, do to them as well (Matth 7,12; Luc 6,31). Kant's Categorical Imperative: Act in such a way that it is possible for one to will that the maxim of one's action should become a universal law, basically means

the same. — But these and similar definitions only give a formal indication for a “good” action. The motive could be, despite of such an indication, even crude egoism, i.e. a mutual contract: Do nothing to me, then I will do nothing to you. [12:183f].

He cites Rom. 13:10 that “love” implements the golden rule. The New Testament names the motive, love, but not the concrete action which has been defined by Schopenhauer “Neminem laede, imo omnes, quantum potes, juva!” Do not hurt anybody, but help all, as much as you can! Jahr continues:

More than 2000 years before Schopenhauer the 5th Commandment has recognized from a broader perspective the benefit over loss (of such a commandment) under the perspective of sanctity of life and life’s expressions. Therefore the Imperative “You shall not kill!” We know from Jesus, that the 5th Commandment does not only prohibit killing, but all bad deeds towards others, even the bad word, the bad attitude’. [12:184].

Jahr’s Bioethical Imperative, based on compassion and love, cannot allow itself the Kantian luxury of just being formal; his Bioethical Imperative nevertheless is categorically rigorous in the request to make deliberate pragmatic situational and prudent moral choices in the respect of life.

### *Care for Good Life and Public Health*

The Bioethical Imperative includes obligations towards one’s own body and soul as a living being (1934). Jahr holds that “According to Christian understanding every human life is ethically “sacred” as such — also one’s own life. Protection of life — one’s own life not excluded — is a duty.” [12:184]. For Jahr, who primarily is interested in the wider aspects of recognising and teaching bioethical virtues and principles, moral duties towards one’s own body and soul provide the bridge to biomedical ethics and public health ethics in the contemporary sense and towards interactive and interrelated goals and visions in personal and public health and hygiene, and in personal and public morality. He asks “how have the duties towards oneself as mentioned in the 5th Commandment to be fulfilled in concrete?”, and answers:

By not taking one’s own life, by not shortening it, hurting or endangering, by not weakening one’s health by unchaste behavior, excessive eating and drinking, rage, frivolous foolhardiness and daredevilry etc. Especially important are the protection of sexual cleanness and the avoidance of abuse of alcoholic beverages. — As to the first, the New Testament judgment is particularly clear: if you commit fornication, you sin against your own life. [12:184f].

The 1920s and 1930s were turbulent times including changes in traditional moral and cultural attitudes and norms. Pastor Jahr displays a critical and conservative view and goes strongly against the *zeitgeist* and argues that fulfilling obligations towards oneself is also a duty towards others:

He who fulfills moral duties towards oneself correctly, avoids hurting others as well. We can demonstrate this in regard to the already mentioned issues of sex and alcohol: He, who follows the vice of indecency, runs the danger of hurting himself bodily and mentally. Sexual diseases as well threaten. But weakness and sickness cause that victim to become more or less a burden to the community, thus hurting all. If he has offspring, he damages those by making them inherit a weak and sick nature, which in turn causes burdens and damages to the community. He, who protects his own life from being hurt, fulfills at the same time his obligations towards the community. Similarly with alcoholism: He, who is dependant on alcohol, may risk severe bodily and emotional dangers. And in doing so, he not only hurts himself, but his family, his offspring, his folk, his race. And, again, he, who protects himself from damage, does good to his "neighbor", to his entire folk, indeed. [12:185]

In *Ethik: Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* (1934), Jahr summarises his broad interpretation of the 5th Commandment as follows: "This all shows the universal importance of the 5th Commandment, which needs to be employed in regard to all life. Rewriting the 5th Commandment results in the Bioethical Imperative: Respect every living being on principle as a goal in itself and treat it, if possible, as such!" [12:187]. Respect for humans and human rights, medical ethics, social ethics and care, individual health responsibility and literacy, the refusal of suicide, they all are just special aspects and specific fields of the general Bioethical Imperative.

## Ethics Education

Ethics and bioethics call for competency and commitment in education and consultation. Being a pastor and ethicist, Jahr's prime interest was in promoting and protecting personal and public morality, in educating people, pupils, and the public. He recognises a moral and professional obligation of ethicists to get involved in public discourse and in educating public morality. Being aware of the growing importance of radio in shaping public opinion and morality, he requests that ethicists not only publish books or articles in professional journals. Referring to the debate about the media presenting public opinion or publicised opinion, he holds: "And if you believe that the press media is only motivated to create a public opinion or at least strongly influence it, then from

an ethical perspective it becomes even a *duty* to contribute towards development of attitudes and convictions according to one's best knowledge and conscience." He reminds his fellow ethicists that publishing in mass media requires other skills and methods than publishing for academia:

The daily press, bringing from time to time contributions, which can clearly be recognized as ethical ones, which are not too long and feuilleton form so that they find interest and understanding of the lay, from this point of view the importance of the press for ethics, including social and sexual ethics, should not be underestimated. [8:149f].

A member of the reform movement in education, Jahr, in a brave article entitled "Dictating Attitudes versus Freedom of Thought?" discusses "democratisation of attitudes" and respect for autonomy and self-determination. His theses include:

Do not teach inflexible subjective ethics. — Strictly avoid camouflaging preconceived opinions under the veil of so called objectivity and by misusing so called interactive teaching (*Arbeitsunterricht*). — Methodologically it is not allowed to only present preferred facts and to suppress or to refute disliked facts or to turn them around at one's own will. — Different attitudes and convictions always have to be recognized. — Different attitudes and convictions including their benefits and mistakes have to be presented evenhandedly and without tendency to favouritism (e.g. Do not look at one through rosy glasses and at the other through black glasses). — Presenting a personal opinion always should be done without putting obligations on others; also, one should not forget to present the shortcoming of one's own conviction. — Instead of tendentious manipulation of attitudes, pupils should be given every opportunity to develop their own attitude and conviction, respectively giving them objective material for developing their own attitudes and convictions later. [11:200f].

Jahr's article was published in 1930 during turbulent *weltanschauung* confrontations in Germany in *Die neue Erziehung* (The New Education); this journal stopped publication in 1934, probably was forbidden. His guidelines for ethics education are based on the respect for individual virtues and values and on interactive non-directive moral discourse.

## The Quest for Precise Terminologies

The term bioethics coined by Fritz Jahr is wider than the concepts of Potter and Hellegers and the contemporary focus on medical and clinical ethics, research ethics and public health ethics; bioethics encompasses the entire world of life.

Is it correct and professional to use such a wide term as bioethics for very precise issues such as clinical ethics or ethics of medical research? Spinoza in his *Ethics* once said “omne esse verum quod valde clare et distincte percipio” and Wittgenstein would add “whereof one cannot speak, one must be silent”. Unclear terminology leads to unclear questions, investigations, goals, and actions, not only in science but in the humanities and in morals as well. If ethics and every-day attitudes can learn anything from science, then that precision in definition is a priority and a precondition for clear conceptual and practical work, for communication, and for cooperation.

Should we continue to call hospital-based offices for clinical ethics “bioethics centres” or rather more precisely “clinical ethics centres”? There are different terms available for different subjects, fields, and issues: bioethics, medical ethics, hospice ethics, health policy ethics, hospital ethics, biomedical ethics, medical research ethics, physician’s ethics, nursing ethics, healthcare ethics, public health ethics, genetics, consultation ethics, environmental ethics, animal ethics – just to name a few. We must be more precise and call apples, apples and oranges, oranges; of course, apples and oranges belong to the vegetable family of edible fruits. Being more precise in terminology would free up the term bioethics to the original broad vision of Fritz Jahr. Reich had suggested keeping bioethics as a general term and

recommends to use the term *bioethics* in its original, global sense, as referring to the ethics of the life sciences and health care; and then use adjectives to specify particular areas of concern with bioethics. For example, one might speak of *medical* bioethics, *environmental* bioethics, *clinical* bioethics, or *nursing* bioethics without implying, with these terms, any particular approach. [16:30]

Jahr would have agreed with Reich, based on his own argument that any specific science and technology should interrelate to her specific ethics such as he related “bioethics” to “biopsychics”. [6:4]

## The Future of Bioethics

Jahr argued and showed that the future and the scope of bioethics will depend on new fields of scientific knowledge and that there must be new specialised fields of bioethics theory and practice based on new scientific insight. Our most recent understanding of global climate change remind us that the globe itself is a living being with its own seasons, long-term and short-term chances, developments and modifications, most of which are totally out of our control, only some of which, such as industrial pollution and environmental destruction,

can be mitigated to a certain point in order to allow for sustained human development and continued human culture and cultivation. Thus, we could add *geoethics* as a discipline, a principle, and a virtue to Jahr's original broad concept of *Bioethik*. The geoethical version of a content-rich Moral Imperative in the Kantian tradition would read: *Respect mother earth with all her forms of life, whether natural or man-made, basically as goals in themselves and treat them, if possible, as such.*

*Bioethics* as developed by Jahr has different shapes and shades; it gives distinctive flavours to a multitude of ethical obligations in the 21st century, some reciprocal among humans, some more or less paternalistic or maternalistic in compassionately and professionally caring for sick, weak, frail, or incompetent fellow humans, some in stewarding plants and animals as co-creatures, some in mitigating or creating natural and social environments as human habitats, some in protecting *geos* as a living entity in herself. Those moral obligations and opportunities will overlap and interact in different ethical, philosophical and cultural models of personal, professional or institutional ethics: medical ethics including prevention, treatment, care, research; bioethics covering respect for and duties to all forms of life, environmental ethics accepting responsibility for natural and man-manipulated environment and their sustained survival and health; geoethics applying reason and responsibility in response to global natural or man-made changes in the protection and promotion of human lives and human cultures. In regard to environments and institutions, Jahr had already an understanding of their own "will to live", including resistance to or eagerness for change, suggesting new methods in the study, design and stewarding of environments and organisations, requiring the expertise and ethos of environmental ethics, land ethics, corporate, and institutional ethics.

Bioethics has developed into many fields and is spanning the globe; it is not an American invention, not European, not American, not Asian, but having different characteristics and features in different cultures and areas of the world. Nothing needs to be added to what Alastair Campbell stated in the inaugural issue of *Asian Bioethics Review*:

We can welcome a plurality of Eastern and Western voices in bioethics; and we can seek for a mature interdisciplinarity, which will allow us to combine sociological and philosophical perspectives in shaping policy. Asia offers us a richness of moral visions, stemming from its diverse cultural heritage, and this richness allows us to see the difference in the way bioethics may be articulated in Asia. [1:29]

The future will tell where terminologies, legacies and different understanding of the mission of bioethics and medical ethics will go. But bioethics is neither

just an applied ethics in the sense that theoretical principles are simply applied to concrete situations, nor is it only a practical ethics in the sense that principles and virtues translate into commitments and attitudes and thus become formative powers for character and personality. Future terminological discourse definitely is necessary and clarity will be instrumental in determining more precisely the vision and mission of human responsibilities towards life and towards humans.

Fritz Jahr's 1927 vision of the personal and professional cultures of bioethics is a heritage for the 21st century in ethics teaching, training, and consulting and serves as guidance in the global development of compassion and expertise in our caring for fellow humans and the worlds of *bios* and *geos*. Jahr's vision and concept of bioethics would not have been possible without the strong influence of Buddhist and other Asian thinking in European 19th and 20th century. But bioethics is neither an Asian, European nor American heritage; it is a heritage and an obligation of humankind. There will be certain specifics in medical ethics and bioethics based on different professional and cultural traditions, but the foundations of bioethics and medical ethics are not culture-specific, they are an essential part of human vision and human culture.

The integration of competence and compassion and of communication and cooperation in personal and professional life will be a challenge to all cultures and to all of us. As envisioned by Jahr, it will need to be a process of cultivation in our dealings with the worlds of *bios*. It will need to focus on professional skills, principles and institutionalizations on one side, and on ethics, compassion and character formation on the other, as the main forces to protect and to serve fellow humans, human cultures, and all forms of life. This is the legacy of Fritz Jahr, the visionary pioneer of bioethics, who was strongly influenced by Asian thought.

## Notes

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